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ABSTRACT

By segregating women into the less responsible and lower paid jobs, the Canadian capitalist system has been able to have a source of cheap labor which represented no competition to the existing male labor force. For example, during the Great Depression, as available teaching positions dwindled, women teachers were compelled to accept small town and rural positions at low pay and with exploitative working conditions. Legislation and school board policy also discriminated against women, especially married women, by creating rules designed to prevent them from getting better-paid positions. The overall effect of sex segregation in the labor market has been to confirm women's alien status as workers. Stereotypes resulting from the segregation of labor have prevented women from moving into new fields. The capitalist system's requirement for cheap labor has modified social attitudes affecting women's consciousness, reduced their labor power, and ensured that all women still seeking employment have done so under conditions favorable to capital and in areas which would not threaten the hierarchy of labor. (Author/WI)

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THE HISTORICAL BASIS OF A SEX-SEGREGATED LABOUR FORCE: ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR WOMEN AND EDUCATION

by

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THE HISTORICAL BASIS OF A SEX-SEGREGATED LABOUR FORCE: ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR WOMEN AND EDUCATION

This paper consists of a descriptive analysis of the ways in which occupational segregation, a visible feature of the labour force in a Capitalist society, is accelerated and more pronounced during an economic crisis. The te poral period chosen is The Great Depression, including the 1920's and 1930's. The profession of teaching provides the major focus of the research. This arena was chosen both because it constitutes a main area of interest of the author and it was thought to represent a particular interest area of participants of an education symposium.

It is not possible within the confines of a short paper like this to make direct and specific connections between the situation of women working in paid labour during the Depression and women's position in the workplace in our current economic crisis. Nor do I wish to imply that the situations are identical. The intensification of labour in our highly industrialized society has resulted in more complexity both of the functioning of the labour process today and of the problems connected to its functioning. Notwithstanding that qualification, several important parallels can be drawn, and the roots of many trends which have crystallized through the years can be located in the example of the Depression. It is hoped that the reader will seek some of these implied connections.

I begin with the assumption that there is no such thing as "women's work." Women's work, rather than having anything to do with special attributes innately peculiar to women, encompasses those fields or occupations which have been assigned to women as a result of events originating outside of, and apart from women themselves. We wish to understand why the label "women's work" brings forth notions of relatively routinized occupations requiring limited individualism or creativity. It is not a coincidence that we think of most forms of women's work as extensions of those functions which women have historically performed

within the domestic setting. Concentrating women in a sector of the labour force is not only advantageous to the workings of the capitalist system, but intrinsic to its operation. In order to make sense of the part played by women within the workforce, it is thus necessary to sketch the functioning of the labour pool within a capitalist system.

Fundamental to the capitalist system is the ability of a labourer to produce more than he/she needs for subsistence. The excess production, called surplus labour, is retained by the capitalist. That amount which the capitalist doesn't need to cover his cost (deliberate usage of the masculine pronoun since I have difficulty envisaging the capitalist as feminine) is profit to be re-invested in the enterprise. In order to cut costs of production, it is to the capitalist's advantage to have as large a labour pool as possible at his disposal. This compels workers to compete with each other, forcing them to accept a lower level of subsistence and to settle for a lower wage. The lower the wage the capitalist must pay, the higher his profit margin.

The nature of the capitalist system has been described as cyclical, that is, periods of expansion followed by periods of recession. This requires the complement of a flexible labour force or at least a segment of the labour force which is fluid, able to be called into service when needed in periods of expansion and likewise to be thrust out of the system in periods of recession.

As capitalism developed, new productive processes demanded huge accumulations of production. This can be accomplised only by reducing the labour cost or by increasing the surplus value obtained from labour. Historically, this has been achieved through automation, where fewer workers produce more. For the working class, this means a situation of endemic unemployment, which Marx labelled "the Industrial Reserve Army." The result is competition by those in the unemployed sector when jobs do become available. Their situation puts them in a vulnerable position, subject to exploitation, where they can be offered lower wages, be subject to poorer working conditions, and be made to work longer hours or increase

productivity on an hourly basis, etc. These workers pose a serious threat to those who have jobs.

Women have historically been participants in the competition produced by the capitalist system. What differentiated their labour from that of men and thereby made them a distinct group was the fact that they received lower wages for their labour. This fact, especially in terms of recession when there was increased competition for scarce jobs, meant that women as a group represented a threat to wage levels.

It is not surprising to learn that these factors create tensions between exploited workers and Capital. One means by which capitalism has attempted to deal with these tensions has been to remove women from direct competition with men in the labour force.

This separation developed in two ways which complement each other. First, women's domestic role as a housewife and all the responsibilities belonging to the private domain received increasing emphasis as capitalism developed. This made it increasingly difficult for a woman to enter the labour market at all, a victim of the combined forces of society's expectations of her and her own socialized view of self. If she were to enter the labour market, it would be at a decided disadvantage. The ideology of service to the family as the only socially acceptable work, and that which was "natural" to women accentuated this position when women weren't needed in the labour force. This ideology was also used to route women into the labour force in times of expansion.

A second aspect of preventing direct competition between women and men has been the development of a sex-segregated labour force. This is the result of limiting competition between men and women for the same jobs. The value of this process to the smooth operation of the capitalist system has been touched. In a recession or more so in a more serious economic crisis, the process is accelerated.

When the economy is in crisis, as during the Depression, women are

forced from the labour market. This is effective in shifting some of men's unemployment to women. At the same time, as demonstrated by various sources, we see that the labour force has developed a substantially more segregated character. Women were removed from competition for the choice positions within the market. Those continuing to seek employment (as most must do as dictated by their material needs) are shifted into competition with other women for positions in the lower echelons of the market.

During the First World War, women in the U.S. and Canada moved into many occupational areas previously held predominantly by men. But contrary to popular belief, a large proportion of women were already engaged in the workforce, having held lower paying jobs beforehand. Yet even as men were returning to the workforce following the war, the economy was beginning to show signs of decline. This made the continued income of female workers indispensible in assisting or supporting their families. The following dichotomy arose: though women's income was required by the family unit, men wanted their jobs back.

When women are viewed as a reserve army of labour, to float into the workfield when needed, and disappear back into the home when employment opportunities decline, this contradiction becomes more comprehensible. Though women had to work, so did men. Moreover, the men wanted to return to the positions previously held, or at least the same stratum of the workforce in which they had been engaged. As the economic climate deteriorated, unemployment began to rise. Women were fired and otherwise forced out of high status jobs by union pressures, various protective legislations, and an ideology which was increasingly underlining the negativity of women in paid labour. Simultaneously, married women were entering the workforce as their husbands were laid off jobs and/or the family income dropped.

The decade of 1920-1930 showed, for example, an absolute growth of women in the professions. When broken down, this means two things: In certain professions, women were replacing men in large numbers; furthermore,

there was an increase in occupational categories and feminized occupations, to say nothing of the rise in population. Between 1926-1929 in the U.S., the absolute number of employed women grew, but no new fields of employment opportunities opened to them. Industrialization was concentrated in the resource industries where women were not included. Thus women were increasing in some specific areas such as teaching and nursing, but in other professional fields, usually characterized both by higher status and a higher pay scale, women were definitely decreasing relative to their absolute increase in the workforce. Also during this era, women's enrollment in colleges decreased, graduates going mainly into women's fields. Women were being advised by agencies like the U.S. Institute of Women's Professional Relations to specialize in interior decorating or household economics to avoid competition with men.

What is being described here is a double process at work, affecting women's position in the workforce. As the market declines and the absolute number of jobs decreases, competition for those positions still available increases, heightened further by the growing number of women seeking employment.

This double process of, on the one hand, channelling women back to the home, their natural place according to the prevalent ideology, and concurrently viewing women as desireable part-time or seasonal labourers, can be seen in operation within the teaching field.

As the sources of monies tightened up, school boards became increasingly prone to hiring the cheapest available teachers, as opposed to the highest qualified, who would of course command higher salaries. This was especially true in the rural school boards in Western Canada where funds had become almost non-existent. These more poorly qualified teachers were primarily women, since women were permitted to teach with second class certificates, whereas first class certification was encouraged and later required of men. The opportunities for advancement for those teachers holding second class certificates were almost nil. First class certification

was mandatory for promotions to assistant, vice-principal, or principal. When there were too few qualified male applicants for the position of male assistant, the Toronto Board of Education amended its by-laws in 1926 so that "male assistants with second class certificates may be recommended provided he obtain a first class certificate within five years."[1] This qualification automatically disallowed women with class one certificates. Previous to the amendment, men could only be temporarily employed but not taken onto the permanent staff. Note that by 1935, second class certificates were no longer accepted from men as it was no longer necessary to ensure male security of the positions--there were by that time enough qualified males to fill all the available positions.[2] The special amendment could then be safely dropped.

Yet, even as the market became further depressed, more teachers were graduating from the normal schools. Teaching appeared to be a good job source as other sources were rapidly drying up and the job shortage was becoming more serious. This was partially due to the fact that teaching salaries had increased after 1910. In Toronto, for example, the gap between the salaries of men and women narrowed. In 1910, women teachers earned 48% of that of their male counterparts; by 1920, this had increased to 57%.[3] Thus, more women felt positively inclined to enter normal schools. Obviously, the growing numbers seeking teaching jobs increased the competition for those positions. School boards started to favour salary cuts, now a real possibility due to the huge numbers seeking the same positions. One Canadian school board received 100 applications for one solitary position vacated; as a result, they were able to hire a teacher for $200 less than her predecessor.[4] In most instances, especially outside of the big cities, it was those teachers with less experience who got the available positions.

In 1922, the annual meeting of the FWTAO (Federation of Women's Teacher's Association of Ontario) requested the abolition of the old model schools, graduating teachers of second class certification. Their aim was both to raise the standard of women teachers as well as eliminate the surplus of unemployed teachers. This request was turned down. By the

autumn of 1925, Ontario had thousands of unemployed teachers as well as huge numbers enrolled in the normal schools. A second proposal to eliminate the model schools was turned down by the premier of Ontario who maintained that these schools were still very necessary in rural areas. He claimed moreover, that any teacher surplus "was but a temporary condition due to business depression which would be eliminated as soon as business brightened sufficiently to attract those who were entering the teaching profession chiefly for its salary."[5] In other words, he wanted to maintain low salaries so that only dedicated teachers would want to stay when salaries elsewhere started to rise again. We can see that the real function of the second class teachers was the supply of cheap labour in "dead-end" positions. Moreover, it was in the interest of government and capital to perpetuate the teacher surplus, thereby ensuring the continuation of cheap labour and powerless (women) teachers. Oversupply continued in the normal schools, one Canadian survey of graduates in the mid-30's revealing that 61% had no jobs.[6] And who was blamed for the hiring of poorly paid, poorly qualified women teachers? Ironically, it was the women themselves, blamed for keeping higher qualified men who really <u>needed</u> the jobs, from finding employment!

One can locate too, instances of legalized discrimination against women within the Board of Education. An amendment in 1935 to By-law 102 of the Board of Education of Toronto required that the maximum hiring age be established as 35 "except in the case of teachers with overseas experience, in which case the maximum shall be 42 years."[7] While making special allowances for men out of the workforce for several years, (we can assume the majority of those persons with overseas experience were male) the return of married women with children to the workforce had been largely eliminated by this By-law.

The increased competition within the teaching profession serves as a microcosm of that occurring in the larger society. The predominantly male unions feared the threat of women, a vast source of cheap labour who might underbid them to get their jobs. Unionists wanted to eliminate the economic

incentive to women as well as offer non-economic reasons for restricting women's part in the labour force. They simultaneously argued for equal pay and that women's economic contribution should be in the home. The "motherhood" argument proved to be a strong influence in an economic climate already filled with insecurity. There was a tendency, in seeking a reason for the problems, to conclude that the elimination of women, an underclass of workers, would cure all. Women were said to be responsible for the recession by moving from traditional roles. The more severe the unemployment situation became, the poorer the system appeared, therefore the greater the threat to order. Women became the logical, natural scapegoats for the unemployment situation. The practiced, oft-repeated line of propaganda went something like this: it was clearly less tragic and more natural for women, rather than men, to lose their jobs. Married women were even considered enemies of society, creating poverty and unemployment. This became generalized to include all women and eventually led to the position whereby women were said to be perpetuating the Depression.

We can find manifestations of this syndrome within the teaching profession too. In 1932, the FWTAO passed a resolution asking school boards to "give preference to unmarried women, except where the married teacher is the sole supporter of the family."[8] This instigated complaints from both unemployed singles resenting the employment of married women with husbands "to support them" and from married women with husbands out of work, lamenting their stress-filled situation. This example serves well to illustrate the way in which competition between men and women had been at least partially shifted so that women in need were pitted against other women in need.

The hardships suffered by most women within the paid labour force during the Depression was certainly experienced by those women within the teaching profession. As available teaching positions dwindled, women were compelled to accept small-town and rural positions. The daily struggles endured by these women in trying to make ends meet, were plentiful. A teacher in Gravenhurst, Ontario, described one school in which she taught as "not fit for chickens." She had to cut the wood for the school and pay

for it; in another school she had to live in a trailer in the schoolyard for three years, and in yet another school she had to walk two miles to school each day.[9] Rural teachers had no teaching aids and few books to read. Yet it is fascinating to reflect that the Minister of Education (not an educator, but a doctor) saw fit to lay the blame upon the oppressed, rather than the oppressor. He said that the miserable lives of teachers was a reflection, not of the economy, but of poor teaching. The new order to be established should, he declared, have its foundations laid in the lives of teachers.[10]

Even as the actual working conditions deteriorated and the notion of "fault" for their conditions became attached to the women themselves, the wages associated with these increasingly tense job situations rapidly declined. Schools across Western Canada, for example, were closing and salaries constantly being lowered. The rural average for women was $980 in 1932 compared with the urban average of $1336. The next year the rural boards were cut to $500, the statutory minimum.[11] The less fortunate had no positions at all. In Moosejaw, for example, over 1000 married women had to leave home to teach again, taking the places of graduates from the normal schools; between 1930-1934, only 10% of normal school graduates from Moosejaw obtained jobs at all.[12] In 1937, over 3000 teachers within the province of Saskatchewan received less than $300 per year.[13] In fact, the average salary in rural Saskatchewan dropped from $1076 to $465 between 1930 and 1935, and teachers were frequently required to take part or all of their salaries in kind or interest-bearing notes.[14] In Moosejaw, the banknotes which teachers were receiving were being ignored at the banks. In 1934, trustees in that city were recommending that no assurance beyond June be given to teachers without promise of government aid. No repairs were done on the schools nor new books purchased. Even more drastic a measure was the closing of schools in the winter to avoid winter heating.[15]

The fact that most support of the Western teachers (both women and men) came from women teachers in the East is a telling comment. One can trace here the connection between women's home role being stressed more heavily and the expectation of the commitment of women to the social services. Moreover,

despite their meager salaries, women teachers were expected to engage in social services. Toronto women teachers donated one percent of their salaries to assisting unemployed "girls." Ontario schools as a whole adopted Western teachers in the sense of committing to assist them, but it was the Women's Federation (FWTAO) which gave the most support. This should not be surprising. Given that the societal mood has been described as swinging towards the position that women's contribution should be made within the home, it would not follow that the plight of women teachers would muster up much sympathy. It would then fall back into the hands of women to aid and protect the position of other working women in order to secure their own positions. Not only did society-at-large not really care about the state of women teachers or more generally married women within the paid labour force, but in fact found the situation of employed women a source of annoyance, given the high unemployment rate and general economic disaster across the country. The contradiction between women's actual economic situation and public discourse about it has been discussed. Teachers in Saskatchewan were chopping wood even as Eleanor Roosevelt declared, "A housekeeping job is just as scientific and engrossing as any office job."[16]

There is not substantive data on women's unemployment rates in Canada during the Depression. However, it is valuable to examine the available U.S. data since similar patterns did occur. The available U.S. employment figures suggest that women in paid labour were affected less than men since their rate of unemployment did not rise to the same extent as that of men. When we take into account the fact that women workers did shift downward into the lower paying jobs during this period, and consider the tendency of the system to produce many jobs in the "cheap labour" category, one can better understand the continued higher employment rate of women. Employers could not afford to fire them, as they could not be replaced at such a low wage rate. Though business collapsed, service-type occupations were still required, thus employment and unemployment by sex and occupational group in 1930 shows that occupations in which women were concentrated contracted less than occupations in which men were concentrated. This segregation along sex lines conflicts with the notion of a fluid labour market, shaped by laws

of supply and demand. It was precisely this segregation which prevented the expulsion of working women in the 1930's, seemingly contradicting the ideology that women must be fired in order to ameliorate the unemployment situation.

The overall effects of the experience of this process of segregation on women were enormous, psychically and socially confirming women's alien status as workers. As women were excluded from certain skilled jobs and "protected" from others deemed dangerous, or unsuited for women, home duties became emphasized more strongly in literature, the home economics movement, and education. One can herein trace the transition towards the stabilization of the family with one earner. Women's work became more strongly identified as peripheral, menial, and part-time. This resulted in the hardening of the stereotypes which in turn prevented women from moving into new fields, particularly those with more long-term viable employment. The particular feature of the capitalist system requiring the on-going availability of cheap labour modified social attitudes affecting women's consciousness, reduced their labour power, and ensured that all women who still sought employment did so under conditions favourable to capital and in areas which didn't threaten the hierarchy of labour.

The situation women employed under the conditions invoked by modern industrial capitalist society must be understood, not as replicating the situation which prevailed during the Depression, but as developing from and progressing further than, that of the earlier era.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Toronto Board of Education, By-Laws and Regulations, 1926. p.43.

[2]Toronto Board of Education, By-Laws and Regulations, 1926 and 1935.

[3]C. Taylor, "A History of the Women Teachers of Toronto (1900-1920)," unpublished paper, Toronto, 1977. p. 35.

[4]D. French, High Button Boot Straps. Toronto, Ryerson Press, 1968, p. 54.

[5]Ibid., p. 61.

[6]Ibid., p. 76.

[7]Toronto Board of Education, By-Laws and Regulations, 1935, p. vii.

[8]French, op. cit., p. 85.

[9]Ibid., p. 82.

[10]Ibid., p. 89.

[11]Ibid., pp. 75-76.

[12]M. Horn, (ed.), The Dirty Thirties. Toronto, Copp Clark Co., 1972, p. 189.

[13]French, op. cit., p. 88.

[14]Horn, op. cit., p. 181.

[15]Ibid., pp. 186-187.

[16]J. Humphries, "Women: Scapegoats and Safety Valves in the Great Depression," The Review of Radical Political Economics, Vol. VIII, No. 1, Spring 1976, p. 106.

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